

Aftermath by **flashforeward**

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Summary:

Billy's missing from basketball practice, Steve wonders why

Aftermath

Author's Note:

written for a prompt on Tumblr

Billy isn't at basketball practice which is weird. Steve's gotten used to being bowled over at least once a scrimmage. It's also oddly quiet. No challenges, no trash talking. Just calls to pass and the sound of the ball and shoes on the wood floor. Steve tells himself he isn't worried about Billy, but there's a seed in the back of his mind threatening to germinate and grow as he wonders: what if he pissed off the wrong person? Because Billy *talks* big but Steve's learned that there's always someone bigger.

Steve finds him later out back of the gym, smoking. His hands are shaking even though it's warm and his shirt's buttoned up all the way which Steve's never seen before.

"All right, Hargrove?" he asks.

Billy doesn't answer, just blows smoke in Steve's face then trails his tongue over his bottom lip and grins.

Steve rolls his eyes and waves the smoke away. "You'd play better if you didn't smoke those," he says because he isn't really sure what *else* to say. Asking why Billy's buttoned his shirt seems a little beyond their level of acquaintance.

Billy shrugs and takes another drag, turning to look out over the playing fields. "I'm already better than you," he says. There's a faint smirk tugging at his lips, but his expression falls again quickly.

"They'll kill you," Steve tries. He isn't sure Billy cares, but he doesn't want to just leave him out here. Because something's *wrong* and leaving him alone with that seems cruel.

"When?" Billy turns his head, meets Steve's gaze and takes a long, deliberate pull on his cigarette, daring Steve to say something else, to do something else.

Steve takes the challenge. "What's wrong?" he asks.

"You're bothering me."

"No, why weren't you at practice?"

"None of your business, Harrington."

Silence settles over them again, heavy and uncomfortable. Billy smokes, Steve watches him. He tells himself not to pry, that it really isn't his business. But this is a completely different Billy than the one he's used to seeing. This Billy isn't loud or angry or violent. He's just. Quiet and blank. And it's unnerving.

"Billy," Steve tries again, reaches out and sets a hand on Billy's shoulder.

Billy pulls away, sharp and sudden. He rounds on Steve, eyes wide and mouth slack. "Don't," he says. He doesn't shout it or growl it, it just comes out as a weary whisper. "Don't touch me, Harrington."

Steve raises his hands, takes a slight step back. "Sorry," he says. "I just. Are you okay?"

"I'm. Fine," Billy says, a little of his usual fire bleeds into his words, but there's a catch in his voice and his hands are shaking so much he drops his cigarette. "Shit." He stomps it out, his whole body starting to shiver, and he pulls his arms in tight to himself, holding himself, looking away as if he's forgotten Steve's there.

"Billy," Steve starts again. Doesn't touch him this time, just speaks and then waits. Billy half turns towards him, keeping his face tilted away. He's shuddering, clenching himself together as if trying to keep from falling apart. "Billy, what's wrong?"

And he breaks. His breath leaves him in a shuddering sob and he hunches over, pressing his hands to his eyes as if he can push the tears back in. "No, no, no *shit*," he says, over and over. "No one's supposed to see this. Just. Shit just go away."

Steve doesn't go away. He doesn't speak for awhile, doesn't try to touch Billy again, just stands with his hands in his pockets and waits.

He isn't sure how long it lasts, how long it takes for Billy to cry himself out, but eventually Billy wipes his tears away with his sleeves, schools his expression, and meets Steve's gaze again.

And the lies come so easy.

"I'm fine," Billy says. "You can cross off your good deed for the day and go home now."

Steve wants to ask what happened. He wants to ask what's wrong. He wants to find some way to fix whatever it is that's weighing so heavily on Billy's shoulders. But he knows Billy will only push him away. The more he tries, the harder Billy will push, isolating himself further in his angry bubble. So he doesn't ask, and he doesn't offer anything.

But he holds his hand out. And he waits, silently, and eventually Billy takes his hand and shakes it.

It isn't enough, but Steve's crossed the wall Billy's built around himself. And that's a start.